

ing out of the room — he blew solo into Ellington's 'Just Squeeze Me.' He completed the sweet, slow melody without a hitch. Then he laid the clarinet on the end table and smiled at his tearful audience.

The boys in the band gathered around him, pulling him out of his chair to administer their bear hugs. Clete was stiff and embarrassed, but nobody seemed to notice. When the men were finished with him, the ladies moved in for their turn. Clete relaxed for them and hugged back, smelled their perfumes, felt his growing erection press on somebody's (Glenda's) leg. This is more like it, he thought; this is what I meant.

LIKE SAMSON AND DELILAH BLUES

Clete — dead-tired after his physical therapy — shuffled behind his walker from the car to the recliner and fell into a deep sleep in front of the T.V.

His wife Juanita, who had been in charge of his grooming since the stroke, decided that she had had enough of that ridiculous comb-over swatch of hair and she cut it (snip, snip) off of his slumbering head with her sewing scissors and threw the mess in the trash.

Clete woke up with a cool breeze blowing on his bare scalp, ran his hand over the naked skin and slumped down into a deep depression.

"Honestly," Juanita said to her neighbor Ruth, "I didn't think he'd take it so hard; I mean, who was he kidding with that hair? Everybody knew he was bald." Clete sat in his chair staring at nothing. He had started drooling again.

Ruth's husband Ellis went home and got his San Diego Padres baseball cap and brought it back and snugged it down on Clete's head. Clete raised his eyes from the rug and gave him a 'Thank You' look.

Within a week, Clete was feeling better; he was adjusting to his new look. If he could have dredged up the words from his cerebral cortex, he would have referred to his appearance as mature, or perhaps distinguished.

His physical therapist Cindy — a sturdy young girl with a pretty face and a fragrant starched-white uniform — said to him: "I like your haircut, Mr. Johnson." She muscled him into position between the parallel bars, then ran her fingers lightly over the white, soft, slightly rippled skin on his scalp. The feel of it made her giggle. Then

she said, "O.K., Mr. Johnson. Let's see what you can do." Clete clenched his jaw and began his arduous walk between the bars. He knew, non-verbally, that to her he was just another frail, damaged old guy who was scared shitless that his life was fucked up for good. He'd show her; he'd come back, all the way, and then he'd try to fuck her.

A FEW WORDS, A TOUCH

Juanita spied an abandoned shopping cart and pulled the Buick into the empty parking space next to it. Clete's aluminum frame walker was in the trunk of the car, but he wouldn't be needing it; he could hang onto the shopping cart and Juanita could walk in front of it to act as a brake.

The right leg was still pretty spastic, but Clete could lift his hip and throw it out in front of himself and lock his knee and flop his foot down and take an efficient, if clumsy, step, and another and another and another.

Crossing the parking lot was exhausting; Clete had to sit on the planter box outside the store for ten minutes to regain his strength.

Inside the store, Juanita stayed in front of the cart. Clete pushed it — slowly and with difficulty, his dead foot slapping the shiny tile floor. The cart tried to get away from him, but Juanita's butt was always there to stop it.

They picked up some catsup, tortillas, diet cola, beer (Clete steered into the liquor department on purpose and stopped in front of a Budweiser pyramid and refused to move until Juanita put a twelve-pack in the cart), milk, coffee and ground beef.

The checker, who Clete always flirted benignly with, recognized him and said, "Hi, Mr. Johnson, you old stud-muffin. How you been?" Clete couldn't answer her. Juanita unloaded the cart. The girl took in Clete's unsteady, white-knuckle stance and the grim smile on his face and realized that things hadn't been too good for him. She reddened and remained as silent as her formerly flirty-but-cute old customer as she rang up the groceries.

As Juanita pulled the cart away from the register and Clete hung on and followed — as tired as he could be now and thinking that he might not be able to make it back to the car — the cashier left her register and came up behind Clete and wrapped her arm around his shoulder and pulled him close and whispered in his ear, "You're gonna make it,